

# Menu Planning

## Overview

Good menu planning involves consideration of the entire food service operation. For sponsors participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP), the menu needs to meet federal meal pattern requirements in order to qualify to receive reimbursement for meals served. The meal pattern requirements are set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and are based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Menu planning should consider students' preferences and take into account details such as kitchen equipment, serving location, food costs, labor budget, staff skills, product availability, and food safety. Planning menus also includes thinking about how individual foods work together in regards to taste, appearance, and aroma and the possibility of incorporating local foods.

## Terminology

**Cycle menu-** A menu developed for a certain length of time and repeated on a periodic basis. The menu is different for each day during the cycle.

***Dietary Guidelines for Americans*** – Written guidelines intended for ages 2 years and over, jointly issued and updated every 5 years since 1980 by the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services. The *Guidelines* encourage Americans to consume a nutritious diet, focusing on foods and beverages that help achieve and maintain a healthy weight, promote health, and prevent disease.

**Standardized recipe** – A recipe that has been tried, adapted, and retried several times for use by a food service operation and has been found to produce the same good results and yield every time when the exact procedures are followed with the same type of equipment and the same quantity and quality of ingredients.

**Whole grain-rich (WGR)** – Whole grain-rich products must contain at least 50-percent whole-grains, and the remaining grain, if any, must be enriched. To qualify as WGR, the item must: meet portion size requirements for the grains component; have at least 50 percent of the grains in the product as whole grains; have all the grains in the product be whole or enriched; have whole grain as the primary ingredient by weight (non-mixed dishes) or as the primary *grain* ingredient by weight (mixed dishes). For further information, see the Whole Grain Resource link listed under Resources.

## What is Menu Planning?

For purposes of federal meal programs, menu planning is a process to help ensure a healthful diet within the parameters of the NSLP and the SBP meal patterns. Menu planning should provide a variety of foods, low in saturated fat, and moderate in sodium, total fat, and sugar. The Nutrient Analysis Protocol guidance manual link is also listed under Additional Resources and is helpful to ensure that menus meet weekly dietary specifications. Please refer to the Breakfast Meal Pattern and Lunch Meal Pattern sections in the Reference Guide.

### *Suggestions for menu planning success:*

- Set aside a time and place for uninterrupted menu planning
- Have reference materials handy (i.e., meal pattern requirements)
- Plan menus for one week at a time
- Confirm foods are creditable (i.e., grains are whole grain-rich)
- Utilize USDA foods

Balance higher-cost foods with lower-cost foods over several days or a week

Think about the equipment and time you have available

Plan the main dish first; the main entrée may also contain grains and/or vegetables

Plan side dishes to meet the remainder of the meal pattern requirements

Serve a variety of foods, making sure that the same foods are not repeated more than once a week

Include foods that are different shapes - round, square, rectangular, wedge-shaped

Include foods that are different colors - tan, brown, yellow, orange, red, bright green

Include foods that are different textures - soft, fluffy, crunchy, crisp, creamy, smooth

Include foods that have different tastes - sweet, sour, tart, spicy, mild

Introduce new foods along with familiar foods

Consider suggestions from students and parents

Do not have salt shakers or sugar packets available

Use low fat, low sodium products

Consider offering a salad bar as this helps plan for vegetable subgroups

Use cycle menus, advantages include:

- Efficiency / time savings due to food preparation familiarity
- Better forecasting for food purchasing due to production record information
- Ease of altering menu or substituting foods not available with another similarly creditable food
- Potential to try new foods and recipes
- Ability to take advantage of food bargains and foods in season
- Using leftovers wisely
- Ensuring nutrition standards are met

Use standardized recipes, advantages include:

- Ensuring product quality by
  - Consistently providing high quality food items
  - Yielding the same amount of product each time
  - Providing consistent portion sizes
- Ensuring consistency by
  - Accurately predicting the number of portions from each recipe
  - Eliminating excessive amounts of leftovers and substitutions
- Controlling costs by
  - Specifying exact amounts of ingredients
  - Managing purchasing and storage better
- Ensuring good results by
  - Encouraging more confidence in food service workers
  - Assuring managers that the nutrient analysis will be accurate as long as ingredients and preparation methods remain the same
  - Increasing student satisfaction with consistent food quality

Use *The Food Buying Guide* (*The Food Buying Guide* link is available in Resources):

- If you do not have a Child Nutrition Label (CN Label) or Product Formulation Statement (PFS)
- To determine the type of food used (e.g., fresh, frozen, canned, whole, diced, etc.)
- To determine how much of a food to purchase
- To determine how a recipe contributes to the meal pattern

### *CN Label*

The USDA Child Nutrition (CN) Labeling Program provides food manufacturers the option to include a standardized food crediting statement on their product label, such as the specific portion of a

meat/meat alternate, grain, and/or vegetable/fruit component of the meal pattern requirements. For juice drinks and juice drink products, the statement shall identify their contribution toward the vegetable/fruit component of the meal pattern requirements.

CN Labels must be authorized by USDA Food Nutrition Service (FNS) prior to use and manufacturers must have quality control procedures and inspection oversight that meet the FNS requirements.

Document a CN label by doing ONE of the following:

- Remove the CN label from product carton (label must be attached to the product carton prior to removal) OR
- Photograph the CN label (label must be attached to the product carton) OR
- Photocopy the CN label (label is laser printed on product carton; label cannot be easily removed).

CN labels that are photographed or photocopied must be visible and legible.

CN labels with a “watermark” are acceptable documentation. Watermarks are used when the CN logo and contribution statement are on product information other than the actual product carton.

Manufacturers may provide schools with a watermarked CN label during the bidding process.

Document a Watermarked CN label by doing the following:

- Keep a hardcopy or electronic copy with the product name and CN number and keep the Bill of Lading (invoice). The product name must be documented on Bill of Lading.

Keep CN label documentation on file for three (3) years plus the current year.

CN labels must be the most current; a new CN label must be filed anytime a product changes and the documentation on file must match the food products being served.

CN labels expire after five years from the approval date.

#### *Product Formulation Statement*

A product formulation statement has the product name, company letterhead, formulation, signature from an official company representative, and it demonstrates how the product meets the meal pattern. SFAs should have a copy of the food label from the purchased product in addition to the product formulation statement. PFS are only needed when a processed product does not have a valid CN label or watermarked CN label.

Keep PFS documentation on file for three (3) years plus the current year.

PFS must be the most current; a new PFS must be filed anytime a product changes and the documentation on file must match the food products being served.

Product Formulation Statements expire after five years from the signed date.

#### *USDA Foods Fact Sheet*

The FNS provides documentation on USDA foods, including nutrition information, product description, and crediting. Please see the USDA Foods section in the Reference Guide.

#### *Fruits and Vegetables*

Familiarity may increase acceptance of foods, so it is advantageous that fruit and vegetables must be served daily (with specific vegetable subgroups offered weekly) in the NSLP and fruit/vegetable in the SBP. Salad bars can be especially helpful in meeting vegetable subgroup requirements in the NSLP.

### *Whole Grain-Rich*

School meals offer the goodness of whole grains. Whole grains provide B vitamins, minerals, and fiber to help students feel full longer, stay alert, and concentrate at school. All grains offered as part of school lunch and breakfast must be whole grain-rich. Please see Additional Resources for more information.

### *Dietary Specifications*

Upon State agency Administrative Review, menus must be analyzed and must meet the current nutrient standards. Please refer to The Nutrient Analysis Protocol guidance manual and Dietary Specifications link found under Additional Resources.

### *Saturated Fat*

The standard specification of less than 10% of total calories as saturated fat applies to the average daily percent of saturated fat found in a week of reimbursable meals. Discretionary sources of calories, such as solid fats, may be added to the menu as long as the menu stays within the specifications for calories, saturated fat, and sodium. For further guidance, see Additional Resources.

### *Trans Fat*

There are two sources of *trans* fat, also known as *trans* fatty acids:

- *Trans* fat formed naturally - produced by some grazing animals, so small quantities of *trans* fat can be found in animal products like milk, milk products, and meat.
- *Trans* fat formed during food processing - created when vegetable oil is made more solid (a process called hydrogenation). Partially hydrogenated oils are used by food manufacturers to improve the texture, shelf life, and flavor stability of foods. About half of the *trans* fat Americans consume is from processed foods and partially hydrogenated oils are the main source of this type of *trans* fat.

Per USDA guidance, *trans* fat should be eliminated (i.e., labels must state 0 gm *trans* fat) since it raises blood cholesterol, which increases the risk for developing heart disease.

### *Low Sodium*

Sodium, also known as salt, is often added to foods during processing, cooking, or at the table. While the body needs some sodium, almost everyone eats more than the body needs. Schools participating in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs play an important part in efforts to reduce the amount of salt consumed by offering lower sodium versions of foods and by flavoring foods with sodium-free spices and herbs. Please see the links under Additional Resources.

### *Buy American*

The William F. Goodling Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act of 1998 added a new provision requiring SFAs to purchase domestically grown and processed foods, to the maximum extent practical. Purchases made in accordance with the Buy American provision must still follow the applicable procurement rules calling for free and open competition. There are two situations which may warrant a waiver to permit purchases of foreign food products:

- The product is not produced or manufactured in the U.S. in sufficient and reasonable available quantities of a satisfactory quality.
- Competitive bids reveal the costs of a U.S. product is significantly higher than the foreign product.

Find more information under Additional Resources.

### *Local Foods*

The USDA defines a locally grown food as one that has traveled no more than 400 miles to its final destination for sale and consumption. There are several benefits to buying locally: better food, a better local economy, and a better local environment. Idaho Preferred is a local website that contains helpful information such as locating local farmers markets as well as food stores who offer locally grown foods. There are recipes available along with a variety of other resources. Find more information under Additional Resources.

### *Salad Bars*

USDA encourages the use of salad bars in the school meal programs. Salad bars have the potential to improve nutrition and encourage the consumption of fruits, vegetables, and legumes. In addition to the nutritional benefits, salad bars may lower plate waste in school feeding programs. While there are many benefits of salad bars, USDA is cognizant that salad bars are not always a viable option in some school food service operations. USDA encourages SFAs to incorporate salad bars into their school food service operations when possible, and to explore other creative options when salad bars are not an option. For more information please see Additional Resources.

### *Substitutions*

Occasionally it may be necessary to make a substitution to a planned menu for reasons such as food not delivered, the incorrect product delivered, or food unavailability. If a food needs to be substituted, it must meet the same nutritional meal component requirement as the food it is substituting.

### *Production Records* (see the Production Records section in the Reference Guide)

Keeping accurate and organized production records are a critical component to being a successful menu planner. Production records ensure the staff prepares the correct menu items in the correct portion sizes to fit the required meal pattern. Production records also provide a record that reimbursable meals were served, which is very important for proof of meal pattern compliance for State agency Administrative Reviews. A lack of production records or incomplete production records could result in the school not receiving reimbursement for the meals, if there is not proof that reimbursable meals were served. Please see the Reference Manual section entitled Production Records for details.

### **Why is Menu Planning important?**

Planning menus utilizing the SBP and the NSLP requirements aims to provide the best overall meals possible along with the nutrients required to support learning and growth while sustaining health and developing good eating habits. Healthy eating patterns formed during childhood are attributed to healthier eating patterns in later years. By choosing the reimbursable meal, students are assured a meal that meets national nutrition standards and complies with the recommendations of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

### **Resources**

Additional resources may be available for this topic. Please check the Idaho School Nutrition Reference Guide website for copies of manuals, user guides, and helpful links to relevant subject matter.